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Napa State Hospital Workers Celebrate Victory Over Department of State Hospital (DSH) Intransigence

OAKLAND -- This week, after nearly two years of protests, the workers who care for mentally ill patients at Napa State Hospital have achieved one of the primary goals in their campaign for safety improvements at the violence-plagued facility -- a campus-wide personal alarm system for staff. That is the technology that could possibly have saved the life of Napa Psychiatric Technician Donna Gross, who was strangled by a patient on hospital grounds in 2010. The alarm system launch was marred by the insistence of Department of State Hospitals (formerly the Department of Mental Health) managers that Napa staff wear their personal alarm devices on a lanyard around the neck, despite workers repeated insistence that the lanyards themselves posed a strangulation hazard.

Only when a lanyard was used in an attack on a psychiatric technician on Wednesday evening did Napa State Hospital officials relent and offer workers the option of attaching their personal alarm device at waist level. Coming just two days after DSH ignored a worker-filed safety grievance that asked the department to postpone the alarm system launch until a safe attachment device could be offered, Wednesday's lanyard attack had drawn intense attention from the media and criticism from political officials. Assemblymember Michael Allen, a former psychiatric nurse and long-time advocate for state hospital workers, was among those who came to the aid of workers on Thursday.

"It took two years of us fighting with the Department of State Hospitals get an alarm system, and it took this latest attack to get them to add something as simple as a belt attachment. We really appreciate the support we've gotten from the community and our elected leaders in this," said Dr. Richard Frishman, a Napa State Hospital psychiatrist.

The Union of American Physicians and Dentists, one of the founding unions in the Safety Now Coalition, will continue to pursue other safety improvements at Napa State Hospital and the other DSH facilities. "This alarm system is an important first step, but there are still many other safety problems to fix at Napa and the other hospitals. We hope DSH has learned a lesson about listening to the input of doctors and other workers," said Dr. Stuart A. Bussey, President of the Union of American Physicians and Dentists, which represents hundreds of psychiatrists and other physicians who care for DSH patients.